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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: DEPARTMENT STATEMENT ON COTE D'IVOIRE'S
HIPC COMMITMENTS AND ELECTIONS

11. Summary: Local press reported positively on the State Department's March 30, 2009, press statement urging Cote d'Ivoire to maintain its economic and political reform commitments under the Enhanced Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative. Most of the dailies, including pro-government and pro-opposition outlets, published the full text of the statement. Others highlighted excerpts of the statement pressing the GOCI to commit to holding elections in 2009 and to implement reform measures, especially in fiscal discipline and transparency. Similar reports appeared on the radio and on web sites of the local dailies and French News Agency AFP. End Summary.

12. Between April 8 and April 10, the Department's statement was a subject of front page stories in most Ivorian dailies. "Disarmament, Elections in 2009 in Cote d'Ivoire: Barack Obama puts pressure on the stakeholders," said a prominent story in Le Temps (a daily close to the ruling FPI party), with a picture of President Obama, juxtaposed with that of President Gbagbo on the front page. The paper also published the full text of the statement.

13. Fraternite Matin (a state-owned daily), Le Patriote (a daily close to the opposition RDR party), Nord-Sud Quotidien (a daily close to the opposition), L'inter (an independent daily) and L'intelligent d'Abidjan also published the full text of the statement. In a separate story, L'inter highlighted parts of the communiqué, saying "The United States believes that long-delayed presidential elections are still technically possible in 2009 and calls on all parties to take every step necessary to ensure that credible elections go forward as promised." The paper further noted that the United States urged "the Government of Cote d'Ivoire to re-commit itself to 2009 elections as a further demonstration of its determination to put an end to the difficulties that the country has faced since 2002."

14. "Washington calls for Cote d'Ivoire's presidential elections to be held in 2009," said a story in Le Jour Plus (a daily close to the opposition). Soir Info (an independent daily) noted that the President of the United States is closely watching the situation in Cote d'Ivoire. The paper said "Washington urged Cote d'Ivoire to fully implement its reform measures, especially those related to fiscal discipline and transparency."

15. The statement also received attention from many local radio broadcasts and web sites. Radio Cote d'Ivoire - a state-run Broadcasting Corporation; UNOCI FM -- the United Nations radio station in Cote d'Ivoire; Radio Al Bayane - a local Moslem radio station and other proximity radios based in Abidjan broadcast the full text of the statement. The state-owned news agency (Agence Ivoirienne de Press - AIP) published on its web site (www.aip.ci) a story using quotations from the statement. "Debt Relief: The United States exhorts the Ivorian government to implement its reform measures related to fiscal discipline and transparency," said the headline of the story with a picture of President Obama. The French News Agency AFP published a story on the statement that was put on the privately-owned www.abidjan.net web site. The news item, which was entitled: "The Ivorian presidential elections are technically possible in 2009, according to Washington," was picked up by many local dailies.

16. On April 9, the dailies again carried commentaries in reaction to the statement, emphasizing that France backs Washington's call for presidential elections in 2009. With pictures of Presidents Barack Obama and Nicolas Sarkozy on the front-page, Fraternite Matin (a state-owned daily) carried a banner headline reading "2009 Presidential Elections: Pressure is mounting." It further highlighted some quotes from the statement issued by the State

Department. "The United States believes that long-delayed presidential elections are still technically possible in 2009 and calls on all parties to take every step necessary to ensure that credible elections go forward as promised," wrote the paper. It went on to comment that this position of the world's most powerful State now has support from France. Commenting on the same issue, Le Patriote (a daily close to the opposition RDR party) carried a photo of Presidents Obama and Sarkozy with a caption reading: "The two presidents are monitoring closely the situation in Cote d'Ivoire."

¶7. L'inter (an independent daily) suggested that President Gbagbo and his Prime Minister, Guillaume Soro, find themselves in a tough situation following calls from the United States and France for the presidential elections to be held this year. The paper insinuated that the wording "long-delayed presidential elections," used by the United States in their statement, showed the level of "exasperation" of this country about the delay of the polls.

¶8. In a commentary, L'intelligent d'Abidjan (an independent daily) linked the State department's statement to "anti-Gbagbo lobbyists" close to the World Bank and the IMF that have been pressing the American President to work on the peace process in Cote d'Ivoire more urgently.

¶9. Comment. While the Ivoirian media is not especially known for its accurate reporting, the press statement nonetheless received a lot of notice. It achieved its objective of increasing international pressure on the government to organize credible elections sooner rather than later. The government must now realize that the HIPC decision alone will not bring laurels from its population; it needs to take the real and necessary step of holding elections in which all eligible voters can choose their next president. End Comment.

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